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ABSTRACT

Seven critical needs require attention if the educational community is to capitalize on current opportunities for educational reform. (1) Literacy must be redefined and recognized as involving more than minimal skills. (2) All children must have access to the tools of learning and the carriers of culture. Library and instructional resources and their budgets must be restored to provide early and ready access to reading materials. (3) The higher thought processes essential to reading and English must be stressed, as must teaching methods that go beyond reading, writing, and oral interaction to include constructive response to ideas. (4) Technology must be used to strengthen reading, writing, and thinking. Studies suggest that children from culturally different and economically handicapped backgrounds have fewer opportunities than their peers to interact with computers and that such experiences are more than twice as likely to be limited to drill and practice activity. (5) Both tests and textbooks must be strengthened. Teachers need to be more aware of the ramifications of assessment programs and of the opportunities implicit in adopting multiple approaches to evaluation. (6) Kindergarten through grade 12 literary programs must be redefined. Too often, overt concern with basic reading and writing skills leads unintentionally to a neglect of humankind's common heritage, and to a reduction in the time devoted to literary studies. (7) Teaching conditions and teacher education must be reconstituted to support achievement of excellence. More concern must be given to qualitative considerations in the teaching of English and reading. (HTH)

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The Labors of Sisyphus; Achieving Excellence in Schooling

James R. Squire

An Address to the International Reading Association

New Orleans

May 7, 1985

Anyone who has tried seriously during the past year and a half to analyze the fifteen major reports, 280 committee and task force reports and over 6000 pieces of state legislation aimed at reform of schooling can be forgiven for feeling that the widespread and extensive uphill struggles of American leaders to achieve excellence in education are like the labors of Sisyphus, who some of you may recall from mythology, required infinite skill, patience, and endurance to achieve a state of grace, yet seldom deviated from his purpose.

If the ultimate end of the current reform efforts seem less clear to us than were those which greeted Sisyphus, at least the immediate obstacles are before us. During the past year, directing the Task Force on Excellence of the National Council of Teachers of English, I have concerned myself especially with the reforms mandatory to achieving excellence in reading and English instruction. Seven critical needs seem particularly significant if we are to capitalize on the present opportunities for improvement.

1. Literacy must be redefined

Excellence in English and Reading means excellence in learning for all children. No single Procrustean standard can define achievement in language and literature. Standards there must be -- high expectations and support in

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striving toward expectations for young people of every economic, cultural, and academic group. But the diversity of our student population yields not to uniform grade-level and age-level requirements.

Particularly distressing on the current scene are definitions of literacy which seem to equate the minimal competencies needed in reading or writing with age/grade word lists or simplistic readability formulas designed for very different purposes. Hopefully, the NCTE/IRA statement on readability will go far to prevent misuse.

Further, we need to recognize that reading and writing are becoming more important, not less important, in our technological age. Our citizens, most of whom will soon transmit messages electronically and instantaneously, may soon require skills and competencies far more advanced than those currently seen at the threshold of literacy. Think, for example, of the need for accuracy in instantaneous comprehension -- if one is to act daily on the basis of ideas and information electronically transmitted.

Further, should not our concept of literacy be extended well beyond minimal skills and include basic awareness of key cultural documents of our national heritage? Who, after all, can think the thoughts of Lincoln or Kennedy or Martin Luther King unless nourished on the same food?

Sharply focussed attention then to both the ends and the essence of English instruction becomes a hallmark of excellence in education.

2. All children must have access to the tools of learning and to the carriers of our culture

One startling characteristic of the past decade in American education has been our neglect of school libraries and of providing children with ready access to books. Twenty-five years ago, spurred by federal support for school libraries, education scored major gains in installing libraries in the majority of elementary schools. Yet concern with children's access to books seems no longer a priority. Threadbare budgets for school libraries will not permit even replacement of worn copies; funding for instructional materials has dropped to around 0.8 percent of total school expenditures, about half of the commitment twenty years ago. In our anxiety to install major computer laboratories in our schools, we have neglected the book - our bedrock resource. Teachers of Reading and English must see that such resources are restored.

Yet research is abundantly clear that children who achieve early independence in reading are children who have early access to books -- at home, in schools, in preschool settings. One cannot visit the nurseryschools in other countries, Israel or The People's Republic of China, for example, without sensing that they have learned this lesson far more quickly than we have. Nothing would do more to stimulate substantial growth for all children in reading and writing in the primary school than increasing ten-fold or twenty-fold their access to books of many kinds. This need, of course, is particularly critical for low S.E.S. children whose working parents are often unable to provide even minimal resources, but studies demonstrate that even the affluent overlook the compelling needs.

3. Stress must be placed on the higher thought processes essential to Reading and English

Curriculum mapping studies, ethnographic research, and other investigation into what is really happening in our classrooms indicates clearly that we overemphasize word-level and sentence-level instruction in reading and writing and neglect discourse-level considerations. Yet almost all of the higher thought processes in composition and comprehension occur beyond the sentence level. Not only do studies suggest that as much as ninety percent of classroom instruction and practice in reading and language arts occur at the sentence-level or below (at least in grades three to six) but less than ten percent of class time -- in English and in subject classes -- allow for student generation of productive language (at least from grades 7 to 12). Unless boys and girls have opportunity to process ideas -- to develop their thinking through the productive uses of language -- they are unlikely to develop the higher order thinking skills.

More instruction than in reading, writing, and oral interaction seems essential in every discipline; teaching methodology which emphasizes constructive response to ideas, important at every grade level. Quiet, orderly classrooms focussing on skill drills or silent reading are not likely to teach many students to think. It takes two to read a book or to complete any act of communication.

The need for interactive educational experience is particularly important for low S.E.S. students in view of the long schoolroom tradition that such students respond best to teaching circumscribed by coverage of discrete

skills, small increments in learning, almost complete subservience to word-level or subword-level and sentence-level activity.

4. Technology must be used to strengthen reading, writing, and thinking

The world of microcomputers and other technological support offers significant new opportunities to those concerned with the processing of ideas through language -- yet only if we think through how to use computers as tools for the mind. Useful as the machines are for supporting administrative responsibilities in testing or instructional management or for providing an alternative for print-based drill and practice, technology used in such ways merely replicates what we are already able to do manually.

Where computers do contribute substantially to excellence in Reading and English is through the uses of word processing. Instructing and guiding practice in the composing process -- planning, drafting, editing, publishing -- naturally flows from the employment of processors for group writing activities and stimulates interactive learning as well.

Interactive comprehension experience in literature or for that matter history, science, or geography becomes far more manageable as young people are guided to set purpose in reading activities, to activate background knowledge, to explore text structure, to review connotative meanings, and to analyze authors' intent. Recent reports from the Educational Products Information Exchange reveal that today's most creative software may be available in the social studies. Specialists in language need to direct urgent attention to how these tools for processing language are being employed in Reading and in

English; and especially how they are being used with low S.E.S. students. Recent status studies suggest that not only do children from culturally different and economically handicapped backgrounds have fewer opportunities than their peers to interact with computers, but that what experience they do have is more than twice as likely to be limited to drill and practice activity.

5. Both tests and textbooks must be strengthened

The lack of fit of goals, texts, and tests became one of the major concerns of school reformers during the early Eighties. It is about time. We know that what we test affects what is taught and what is learned. To a considerable degree, the lack of attention to the uses of productive language and constructive response to reading reflects the focus of many state and district assessments and virtually all standardized tests (in all subjects) remain focussed on sentence-level and word-level skills.

Given the magnitude of the problem, the task of changing is enormous. More than seventy different state tests are currently in use. Most program-related textbook examinations reflect the characteristic activities of the widely-used commercial instruments (since the instructional materials exist in part to prepare children for existing external examinations). Teacher-made tests may be the most deficient of all, albeit the easiest to change.

Needed is greater awareness on the part of all teachers to the ramifications of the assessment program and the opportunities implicit in adopting

"multiple sloppy measures" to guide instruction, to use a term coined by Pennsylvania. Indeed awareness of the present need for multiple approaches to evaluation may in itself stimulate excellence in education.

Recent uses of writing samples are important in encouraging children's competence in assimilating ideas, as is employment of interactive computerized instruments to assess growth in the power to think. Both offer manageable administrative approaches. Those who care the most deeply about the quality of literacy and language education need to step forward with comprehensive programs.

6. Our K-12 programs in literary education must be redefined

With the sole exception of Mortimer Adler's The Paideia Proposal, the teaching of literature seems most neglected in the current spate of reform reports. In one or two important states -- particularly in California under the watchful eye of State Superintendent William Honig -- the quality of the schools' literary education is receiving serious thought. Secretary William Bennett's plea To Recapture a Legacy came from the National Endowment but saw education in the humanities mostly as a problem for higher education. The newly proposed national survey of cultural literacy, to involve Diane Ravich, Chester Finn, and several of our more insightful scholars, does promise to alert us to the issues. Too often, however, overt concern with basic reading and writing skills lead unintentionally to a neglect of our common heritage and, quite possibly, to a reduction in the schooling time devoted to literary studies.

Further, the common heritage seems singularly uncommon if graduates from our schools and colleges share few literary experiences in common. The recent lack of attention to building a common heritage seems singularly inappropriate at a time when researchers in cognitive psychology are demonstrating the power of background knowledge to shape an individual's capability to understand and respond to what he reads. Yet, for many of our students, the commonness of the background is dependent upon what schools will do. Otherwise we abdicate a responsibility to transmit a common heritage to the purveyors of television: to LaVerne and Shirley, to Magnum P.L., to Dallas and Dynasty and General Hospital.

Understandably worried about reinstituting prescribed curriculum requirements in reading, few national specialists in the teaching of literature are yet ready to argue for even specifying a small number of common titles. As the National Coalition of English Associations stated in mid-1984, "So much excellent literature exists that different schools may reasonably make different selections of literature for the students."

Still, quality must be a factor. We must never let our concern about the literary transaction between book and reader blind us to an awareness that the richness of the transaction is directly related to the quality of the stimulus. We may need to reexamine the literary canon to identify those books which speak to young people today. But we can't ignore our heritage. There may be gaps in any student's literary education, but those gaps should not include all Shakespeare, all Dickens, all great books for children ranging from Dr. Seuss and E. B. White to Madeline L'Engle, all poetry, all Greco-Roman mythology, and all of the great rhetorical tradition of the democratic peoples.

11. Teaching conditions and teacher education must be reconstituted to support achievement of excellence.

Excellence and equity in Reading and English will never be achieved without stronger and more imaginative teacher preparation (including in service staff development) and improved teaching conditions. Many of these problems are now receiving such wide-spread attention that the profession seems on the verge of establishing more intelligent career paths, better compensation programs, improved pupil-teacher ratios, and the like.

Yet in the teaching of Reading and English, more concern must be given to qualitative considerations. Recent studies in cognitive psychology have taught us much about metacognition, about learning how to learn. We are beginning to apply these insights to the education of children in reading and writing -- clarifying purpose, reviewing progress, understanding process, developing self monitoring skills.

Yet these same principles of learning apply equally to the learning of adults and need to be widely considered in our preservice and inservice programs. Certainly, seminar approaches and more interactive learning is urgently needed in staff development. In a sense, our staff development programs, like our instruction for students, remains fixed at the equivalent of "word-level" or "sentence-level" discourse.

These seven conditions may not fully describe all current concerns with achieving excellence in Reading and English, but they do seem to form our

modern-day equivalents of the labors of Sisyphus. Only to the extent that these goals are achieved will the nation's schools be able to provide the quality of educational experience envisaged in current reform efforts. Only if all of us in Reading and English keep our eyes firmly on all of seven of these tasks can we hope to achieve lasting reform. We currently face a window open to new advancement in education, but will it be open for long? Are we, like Sisyphus, capable of seizing the opportunity and through vision, commitment, and hard work translating our present hopes into future reality?

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